

BEAUTY IS TRUTH, TRUTH BEAUTY: THE CORE OF KEATS'S ROMANTICISM

MD. ZIAUL HAQUE¹ & NAZNEEN RAHMAN²

¹Lecturer, Department of English, Asian University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

²Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Asian University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Escaping into the world of imagination is an easy way to forget the present pains of life. John Keats, the most romantic among romantics wants to get free from the present pains of life and searches beauty in the world of imagination. To Keats, beauty lies in truth and anything true is beautiful. He loves nature and his touch transforms everything into beauty. He creates an imaginary world of dream where one can forget the harsh realities of life. But one has to come back and face the real world and be in his senses. We seek pleasure and find its true meaning in this world rather than escaping. So, the question arises does the escaping into the world give real pleasure or accepting the reality of life is the best way of getting beauty and pleasure. This article tries to persuade Keats's aphorism through some of his famous odes and shows the way to escape into the world of imagination and search for beauty. At the same time, it also aims at eliminating the pessimistic approach and accepts the truth of real life after comparing the fake endeavor to escape.

KEYWORDS: Romantic Poetry, Beauty and Pleasure, Love, Adventure

INTRODUCTION

The essence of romanticism is found in all literature. The complete expression of the individual is expressed in romantic poetry. According to critics art is the creation of beauty and romantic art gives us the kind of beauty which is uncommon and mysterious. Romantic poetry is highly subjective, imaginative, exciting, curious, aspiring and restless. It represents the world of dream and the romantic poets like to escape from the harsh realities of life to a world of romance and beauty. The famous poet, John Keats, is considered to be the most romantic of all the romantic poets as he is the most escapist of all them. He wishes to

"Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget

The weariness, the fever and the fret"

of real life. Keats's poetry is the purest poetry in the sense that it is neither political nor expressing any social significance.

Keats, like other romantics, tries to find an escape in the past. The ancient Greeks and the glory of the middle age attract Keats's imagination immensely. He is inspired by the past and rarely writes about the present. The theme of Endymion, Lamia and Hyperion is classical while the style is romantic. La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Isabella and the Eve of St Agnes are medieval in origin. So, Keats escapes from the realities of the present to the past. The themes which we find in Keats's poetry are highly romantic and most of his poetry is busy in the quest of beauty. Love, adventure, chivalry, pathos are also some of his themes. The fear of death runs through some of his poetry and disappointment in love is still another theme found in his poetry.

He loves nature and his touch transforms everything into beauty. He has a great devotion to beauty and he finds truth in anything which is beautiful. Beauty is his religion and this beauty makes him forget everything. To Keats, beauty is

everywhere. So, beauty is the dominant theme and one of the major hallmarks of Keats's poetry. Therefore, this paper focuses on Keats's romanticism which conveys us the message through his poem

"Ode to Grecian Urn" where he says

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty. (49)

But if we study his poetry with great attention we see that the essence of truth and beauty lie not in an imaginary world rather in real life. So it is the reevaluation of his poetry to eliminate the pessimistic approach which leads us to total darkness and the same time it is not the way of escaping from the realities of life but find pleasure among the pains of the world with the said target.

In the 'Ode to Grecian Urn', the urn is depicted as a beautiful piece of art and according to Keats it seems as if a legend which is carved on its sides. Keats asks what legend is meant by the extra ordinary forms of the figures on the urn which has been the same for centuries. This poem presents the Urn in its mystery and shows what questions it poses to the poet. The main subject consists of the scenes on the Urn, not as a casual observer might notice them, but as Keats sees them with the full force of his imaginative insight into the metaphysical problems which they raise and their hint of another life different from that which we ordinarily know. It also relates the experience gained from the Urn to its special order of reality and answers the questions which the poem has raised." (Bowra 135-136)

The urn is a mystery and Keats shows imagination as superior to reality. As Keats writes:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on; (11-12).

These lines assert that the unheard music is far sweeter than the music heard. Anything beautiful must be true which in Keats's words is

"What the imagination creates on Beautiful must be true whether it existed before or not."

But it is universal that art is permanent while human life is temporary. The urn will be as it is forever. The leaves of the trees will remain evergreen, neither shedding the old leaves nor having new leaves. The music will be there forever which we can never hear-still it is more melodious. The musician creates music unceasingly without the fear of dying one day. The young lover will always crave for the love of his maiden. The maiden will always run away and remain beautiful forever. The lover's love is unique in the sense that his love is ever fresh and will never perish. And the maiden will be young throughout her life not to think of growing old. But the earthly love usually leads to sorrow and darkness.

The love and beauty depicted on the urn is somewhat different from reality; love in real life gains everything, loses interest, fades and dies; and beauty is transitory, it leaves the body of a maiden transforming her into an old woman. Then we find that the poet's imagination creates a small town which is empty and silent as all the people are out of town with a priest for the purpose of sacrificing or for a pious deed. As Brian Stone says, "The absence of life in the town emphasizes the absence of real life in the urn itself. The town is doubly dead; it is not pictured on the urn, and its inhabitants have all left it. If art, as represented by the urn and its pictures, is the ultimate consolation, it is also death, because it promises no movement." (83).

It seems as if the poem ends here with the touch of death but there is still the fifth and last stanza of the poem with a new light. The urn will remain as it is generation after generation and comfort them with its beauty like a friend. The only real thing is beautiful.

The urn invites mankind to seek shelter in the eternity of art which lacks the essence of life, though the soul may take it as its friend to hide from the pain of life. But, according to Keats, we need to know what truth is and what beautiful is, nothing more is needed to know. Truth is simple to understand but it is quite tough to define. Keats's aphorism is that no truth can be ugly; every truth is beautiful or pleasant. To Keats it is a great discovery which the urn will teach the mankind forever. This ode takes us far away from the real world to the world of eternity and conveys the message that art is superior to nature in the sense that art is permanent while nature or human life is transitory. The joy of art is forever while the joy of real life is limited. So an urn, a Grecian urn greatly inspired Keats to produce such a beautiful poem which definitely contains the warmth of truth. Bowra says, "The meaning of this message is beyond dispute. Mr. Garrod rightly paraphrases it, 'there is nothing real but the beautiful and nothing beautiful but the real.'[. ..] Truth is another name for ultimate reality, and is discovered not by the reasoning mind but by the imagination."

To Keats, beauty is the touchstone of truth. He is a worshipper of beauty like the Greeks. The final message of the urn is beauty is truth and truth is beauty which is all we need to know.

Keats in his "Ode to Nightingale" also searches for beauty. He finds momentary beauty of life in the bird's song — a world different from the real world. But due to excessive joy, he feels pain deep in his heart. The poet wants to fade far away from the harsh realities of life —

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget

What thou among the leaves hast never known,

The weariness, the fever, and the fret.(21-23)

The poet doesn't want beauty to fade away, so he decides to leave the real world and enter the beautiful and romantic world of the bird through imagination. He flew to the world of tranquility on the viewless wings of poetry rather than drinking wine. He even welcomes death in the charming world of the bird which would be sweeter than ever. The poet will die but the bird will keep on singing and distribute the sweetness of its song among those who are alive. One of the greatest features of romantic poetry is to pass from the world of time to the world of eternity. And here in this ode, Keats flies to the world of infinity through the immortal song of the bird but the poem doesn't deny the sorrows of life rather it is transmuted into beauty which is a truth. According to Middleton Murry, "it is a poem of midnight, and sorrow and beauty".

Keats wished to fade far away with the enchanting music but we see that the music itself fades away and suddenly it is:

Buried deep

In the next valley-glades:

So we have to be in this world of reality with all the worries and sufferings and search beauty in everything which is true. We can't enter the past and even can't touch the future.

Keats in his "Ode to Autumn" describes the season autumn with a new light, which has its own beauty, its own music too:

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, - (23-24)

Here the poet looks back to spring; the sweetness of the season for a moment but immediately comes back to the present and enjoys the beauty of autumn. His love of nature is fully exposed in this ode. The search of joy in the present, the isolated beauty of the hour gives the ode a unique charm. Autumn is not the beginning of winter rather it is a season of fruitfulness and fulfillment. The critic, Sidney Colvin says: "In words so transparent and direct we almost forget they are words at all, and nature herself and season seem speaking to us."

"Ode on Melancholy" reveals the truth that melancholy and all that is beautiful, delightful and joyful live together. If somebody deeply understands beauty, joy or delight, he'll be able to grasp the intensity of melancholy. According to Keats, melancholy is an essential part of beauty because it is from beauty that melancholy is born. Too deep thought of melancholy destroys the true essence of it. Brain Stone says,

This poem is a concentrated expression of Keats's familiar belief about the necessary conjunction, for himself as poet, of pleasure and pain, of joy and sorrow, using analysis of the mood of melancholy as the means. (The Poetry of Keats.85)

The first stanza warns us against a deep thought of melancholy which may give rise to a dead soul. As the poet says:

"Do not drown your senses in total forgetfulness, if you want to feel the full force of melancholy. By doing so, your soul will become dead and you will not feel any kind of anguish or pain."

The poet asks not to go with those who try to seek death. We should not invite such any thing which with its gloomy and melancholic touch will drown our melancholy too deep destroying the true sense of melancholy:

For shade to shade will come too drowsily,

And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul. (9-10)

The second stanza tells us how to enjoy sadness with deep fulfillment. Melancholy is like a thin layer in front of our happiness which does not create any darkness. When we are sad, we should deeply enjoy our sadness by watching the beauty of a morning rose, the rainbow colors, and flowers, beloved's angry look, etc. In the third and the last stanza the poet gives us the real picture of melancholy. Here "She" is Melancholy itself, which Keats personifies as female. The goddess of Melancholy and the goddess of Beauty dwell in the same temple:

She dwells with Beauty — Beauty that must die; (21)

We know that beauty is transitory and this feeling makes us sad. Again the goddess of Melancholy and the god of Joy are dwellers in the same temple. Joy is also short-lived and while we are experiencing the pleasures of joy, we have the fear of this joy to be vanished in a short period of time. That's why the poet rightly wrote the famous lines:

Ay, in the very temple of Delight

Veil'd Melancholy has her Sovran shrine, (25-26)

One who has tasted delight; he and he can only enjoy and praise melancholy. The ode is so enriched by imaginative and intellectual perception that Swinburne (Fraser, 48) considered it 'the subtlest in sweetness of thought and feeling' of all the odes.

Through a brief discussion of Keats's famous odes, it is noticed that escapism is not a way out of all pains. It's a momentary. It is not the permanent solution of life. That is why Keats also frequently came back to the real world

from that of imagination. Because ultimate truth and beauty don't lie in the state of escapism but in the state of reality that he finally exhibited in his poetry. So the core of Keats poetry advocates us not to escape and seek short lived pleasure rather find the deep truth in the real life which is the core of ultimate beauty. The hardships of our lives carry the essence of truth where people should seek the beauty and take everything as beautiful so that we may find the meaning of truth which will lead us to our death — the ultimate truth.

REFERENCES

1. Bowra, Maurice. *The Romantic Imagination*. Oxford University Press: London, 1966.
2. Stone, Brian. *The Poetry of Keats*. Penguin critical studies: Penguin Books, 1992
3. Byron, Glennis. *John Keats Selected Poems*. York Press: London, 2001
4. Murry, J.M. *Keats*, 4th ed. New York: Noonday Press, 1995
5. O'Neill, Judith. *Reading in literary criticism*, 2nd ed. Universal Book Stall: New Delhi, 1990
6. Bate, Walter Jackson. *Negative Capability. A Collection of Critical Essay*. Ed. by Walter Jackson Bate: Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1998.

